DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 898 JC 990 613

AUTHOR	Thot, Iris Delores
TITLE	How To Tutor a Student in a Foreign Language.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	19p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Community Colleges; Grammar; Higher Education; Language Teachers; Languages; Learning Strategies; *Second Language Instruction; Student Characteristics; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods; *Tutorial Programs; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS	Santa Monica College CA

ABSTRACT

These "tips" on how to tutor a student in a foreign language include: (1) Get to know the student, which class he or she is in and how the instruction is conducted; (2) Be a good listener, a skill that, like the first tip, is essential in lowering a student's affective filters; (3) Be patient--instruction may require many repetitions; (4) Be enthusiastic and excited about language; this will make it more enjoyable to learn; (5) Know how to explain the language and its structure to students training to become tutors--grammar skills in both English and in the foreign language being taught are essential in effective language tutoring; (6) Give all students a review of English grammar; (7) Know the language textbook the student is using in class and have a copy of it to refer to during tutoring sessions; (8) Know what resources are available for the student, i.e., be able to recommend pertinent books, verb wheels, ready-made flash cards, and computer or Web-based programs; (9) Be familiar with various foreign language teaching techniques, such as the natural approach, the communicative approach, the audio-lingual method, and the Dartmouth approach, and (10) Find out the student's learning style. (CB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 433 898

How to Tutor a Student in a Foreign Language

By Iris Dolores Thot

FL990613

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

I. Thot

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

How to Tutor a Student in a Foreign Language

By

Iris Dolores Thot, Ph.D.

Director of Foreign Language Tutoring, Santa Monica College

Santa Monica, California

Introduction

Santa Monica College is a highly esteemed two-year college nestled between the Pacific Ocean to the west, the sprawl of urban Los Angeles to the east and south, and the Santa Monica Mountains in the north. Boasting a campus-wide curriculum which encourages academic excellence and stresses the importance of teaching, the college sends more transfer students to UCLA than any other college in the state.

Within this oasis of academic flowering and innovation is the **Modern Language Department.** Offering students the choice of ten foreign languages (Chinese, French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Persian, Russian, and Spanish), many more than the typical community college, the faculty which teaches them are just as impressive as the language selection. Many faculty members have a Ph.D., and many others also teach at such venerable institutions like **UCLA** and **USC.**

As director of tutoring in all the foreign languages offered at **SMC,** I am in charge of recruiting, evaluating, and hiring foreign language tutors, as well as organizing the tutoring schedule. The tutoring program is located in the

TC990613

Technology Building, adjacent to the brand-new **Modern Language Laboratory** set up in the Spring of 1999.

Due to intense student demand, tutoring is comprised of drop-in services only. No appointments are made except when I am directly involved in tutoring a student, which I often do in French, German, Italian, and Spanish.

The following guidelines to tutoring students in a foreign language were compiled after years of experience tutoring and teaching. The author hopes that they will be helpful to those in a foreign language tutorial coordinator capacity, or for anyone who tutors students specifically in foreign languages.

Tip # One: Get to Know the Student

It goes without saying that in order to have students learn better, it is necessary to lower their affective filter, i.e., assure that they are the least nervous, anxious, etc. In order to do that, it is necessary to take time out to ask a few pertinent questions before actually beginning the tutoring session. For instance, one should ask the student's name, what language and level they are in, and what instructor they have. It is also useful to ask how the class is conducted, for instance, does the teacher speak primarily in the target language, is the textbook used, are things routinely written on the board?

These questions not only give the tutor a springboard for plunging into the tutoring session, but they put the student at ease and makes him or her feel that the tutor cares. It might sound cliché, but this author knows how important it is for

students to feel validated. It will make them feel more comfortable and, once the session gets underway, will enable the learning process to take hold even better.

Tip # Two: Be a Good Listener

This goes along with the first tip and is also essential for lowering a student's affective filters. Just yesterday I worked with a young woman for the first time, and before she proceeded to tell me what she was having trouble with in Spanish, she went into many details of her life. I listened, showed empathy, and encouraged her to keep going amidst all the struggles.

After she finished her sad litany, she thanked me, and said that she had needed to get all of this off her chest, and that now she could concentrate on the matter at hand: Spanish. The tutoring session went very well, and she was indeed able to concentrate, applying the tips I gave her for Spanish sentence structure with ease. I am convinced that she would not have been able to get as much out of the tutoring session if she had not unburdened her soul.

I encourage all tutors to listen to what students are telling you. Granted, some of it may not have all that much to do with Spanish, French, German, Japanese, etc., but the opportunity to de-stress by sharing what is on the student's mind might be the first step towards improving in the foreign language because it puts the student in the right frame of mind. Thus, the student feels better and the tutoring session can get off to a strong start.

Tip # Three: Be Patient!

Language learning can be terribly difficult for some people. Whether it be due to an auditory processing disorder, some other type of learning disability, or simply a "block" towards learning a foreign language, getting that language requirement in can be a nightmare for quite a few college and high school students.

Although it may be boring for us foreign language professionals to be helping beginning Spanish students to conjugate the verb *hablar*, patience is essential. If I had received a penny every time I explained the difference between the *imperfecto* and the *preterito* in Spanish, or the *imparfait* and the *passe compose* in French, or the difference between a direct and an indirect object pronoun in any language, I would be rich indeed!

Yes, it can be tedious to hash and rehash material which a tutor knows backwards and forwards, but I believe that making that material interesting and meaningful to the student, as if we, the tutors, were explaining it for the very first time, is truly the sign of a superb, skilled tutor. Does it take patience? Yes! Is it worth it? Yes! Even the most seasoned tutor never tires of seeing the "light bulb" of understanding light up in a student's eyes. It is the most satisfying part of our profession, and it is worth every ounce of patience.

Tip # Four: Be Enthusiastic

There is nothing harder for a student who is having difficulty in a subject than a

tutor and/or instructor who is not enthused about the subject they are teaching or tutoring. I find that my natural level of enthusiasm is highly addictive, and that even students who initially disliked Spanish, German, whatever, walk away with a higher regard for the language once they understand it a little better and once they notice how great I think it is.

Throughout my years of teaching and tutoring I realized how impossible it is to do a good job without a certain level of enthusiasm. This would be like a salesperson trying to sell a product he or she doesn't think highly about! What kind of sales pitch would that be?

Certainly I am not suggesting that we promote an atmosphere where all of the tutors in our tutoring lab come on duty with smiles glued onto their faces. That would be not only be cheesy, it would be unnatural, too. I am simply suggesting that tutors who are excited about their language(s), and excited about getting that knowledge across to students are a definite plus, since they create in the students a desire to succeed in the subject matter and this, in turn, will make the language more enjoyable for them to learn.

Tip # Five: Know how to Explain the Language(s) You are Tutoring

As the director of Foreign Language Tutoring, one of my duties is to recruit, screen, and hire prospective tutors. Most of the want-to-be tutors who come to me seeking employment are native speakers of their languages who may or may not know how to explain the grammar (I find this out once I give them a screening

exam). As a native speaker of German, I understand how a native speaker without sufficient grammatical knowledge may tend towards telling students what "sounds" right, than actually explaining the rules (in fact, I did this before I learned how to explain German grammar).

Just speaking a language fluently does far from qualify a person to become a foreign language tutor. It is not enough to just tell a student that using the *imperfecto* in Spanish sounds better than the *preterito*, or that the *accusative* sounds better than the *dative* in German; concrete examples and knowledge of the rules are necessary.

For native speakers thinking of becoming foreign language tutors, knowing how to explain your language means delving into the depths of a grammar book and reviewing, or taking a class. I did this with German, and I was glad that I did. The semester following my taking German Two, I became a tutor, and a very competent one at that!

Tip # Six: Give the Student a Review of English Grammar

Throughout my experience teaching Spanish and German in high school, college, and university and my tenure as a foreign language tutor at Santa Monica College in the 1980's and again in the late 1990's, I have experienced countless times how flimsy a foundation in English grammar our students possess. Whether they don't learn sentence diagramming in school, have

forgotten it, or simply didn't have it drilled in enough, is not always clear, although I have a strong suspicion that all three factors are culprits.

Anybody with even the minimal knowledge of foreign language education knows that adult students **cannot** understand the grammar of another language if they do not understand their own. This is simply not possible. Thus, if a student does not understand what a subject, direct and indirect object are in English, he or she will just **not** grasp the German case system (Nominative, Accusative, Dative, for example).

I have spoken to more students than I can count who have said that after ten minutes with me, they understand the grammar of the other language and of English better than they ever have. Although this is flattering, I find it sad, if not tragic, that teachers (of English **and** Foreign Language) are not taking the time out to make sure students understand the meanings of basic grammar terms. I find that the new trends in language teaching, call them "Whole Language," "Communicative," or "Natural," have their drawbacks. A student's verbal skills may improve with these approaches, and that is positive, indeed, but along the way I feel that there has been a neglect of grammar, which is manifesting itself in epidemic proportions across our nation and our schools.

The graduates of those schools are coming to colleges around the country, enrolling in mandatory foreign language classes, and becoming stalled and frustrated by their insufficient knowledge of English grammar. The author heartily suggests that any prospective foreign language tutor thoroughly reviews the

structures of the English language before beginning the tutoring of any foreign language.

Tip # Seven: Know the Language Text, and Have a Copy of it Handy

I cannot overemphasize how important it is to be familiar with the textbook used by the class in which the foreign language student is enrolled. At our institution we offer ten foreign languages and I tutor four of them (German, French, Italian, and Spanish). For each language and level a different text is used, and so I make sure not only to familiarize myself with the texts, but to have a copy of each in my office, which I and my tutors use.

Having extra copies of the texts handy not only makes it easier to brush up on that long, lost Italian grammar (in my case!), but to have one's own copy when tutoring a student. There is nothing more difficult than trying to read a text back-words, side-ways, or cross-eyed. By having one's own text, the tutor can not only read exercises on the page better, thus ensuring that the student is better aided, but in the event of down-times (which don't happen all too often, but when they do, I tell my tutors to be productive), the text can be studied and perused to make sure that the tutor's knowledge is up to date.

Tip # Eight: Know What Resources are Available for the Student

As I come across students on a day to day basis, I am quick to realize that they are not always aware of the resources available to help them once they leave the tutor. I recommend books, verb wheels, ready-made flash cards, as well as computer, CD-ROM and web-based programs to students once the tutoring session is over for the day.

Some of these materials no student should be without such as the 501 Verb books put out by *Barron's Educational Series, Inc.* Others, such as computer verb tutorials, can be used to much affect as reinforcers. It is imperative that foreign language tutors become as familiar as possible with the wealth of resources available, 99% of which student will be unaware of exists.

Since our college opened up its brand-new multi-media foreign language lab, the author was unaware of the majority of new language-based software out there, especially those which utilize all sorts of different learning styles such as audio, visual, and kinesthetic; these sorts of programs are particularly useful for learning disabled students. Those students with audio processing disorders, for example, would highly benefit from programs such as *Triple Play Plus!,* which combine the different intelligences through games like memory and bingo, thus eliminating the traditional heavy emphasis on audio.

Finally, foreign language tutors working at an academic institution need to be aware of resources available to students on campus such as the **disabled students center, human development, etc.** With experience, I have become

somewhat skilled in recognizing learning disabilities or other difficulties a student might be having.

Often times, the student will not even know he or she has a learning disability, and will become extremely frustrated with the foreign language learning experience (which can be difficult even under the best of circumstances). By referring students to the right place on campus, a foreign language tutor just might salvage the little self esteem and love of the foreign language, which might be left.

Tip # Nine: Be Familiar with Various Foreign Language Teaching Techniques

It is always advisable for any foreign language tutor to be aware of different teaching methods such as ***The Natural Approach, The Communicative Approach, The Audio-Lingual Method,*** and ***The Dartmouth Approach.*** As part of my routine questioning of the student as to the name of his or her teacher, I always ask about the instructor's teaching style. Students will generally not know the terminology but will proceed to give a description, thus giving any tutor familiar with the terms enough hints to determine which style the teacher uses predominately in the classroom. Many times a combination of different teaching methods may be used, but at **Santa Monica College** most instructors will use ***The Natural Approach*** at least 60% of the time.

Many students who seek out a tutor do so as much on account of the particular teaching method as they do because of a problem with the subject matter. For example, for a learning disabled student with an audio processing disorder, methods such as ***The Natural Approach*** or ***The Communicative Approach*** can be a nightmare, since these styles of teaching concentrate predominately on the verbal.

Having a basic understanding of the instructor's teaching style also gives the tutor the opportunity to practice this style further with the student (i.e., if ***Natural Approach,*** practice conversing with the student, if ***Audio-Lingual Method,*** practice dialogues and dictations), and also the knowledge to advise the student on how to become more successful in the class (i.e., listening to Spanish radio to train one's ear better if ***The Natural*** or ***Communicative Approaches*** are used, and/or advising learning disabled students to seek out extra help from a specialist).

Tip # Eleven: Find Out the Students' Learning Style(s)

Helping students to help themselves are the watchwords of good tutors. We are not supposed to do students' work for them but rather, we are there to guide and supervise the student until he or she can understand and do the required work alone. Going along with this thought is knowing what a student's learning style is.

One of the first things I ask students after their name, teacher, language and class level is the following question: "Do you know what your learning style is?" Often times students will be oblivious to this term, so I rephrase the question to: "How do you learn the best? Do you learn better by **hearing, speaking,** or **doing?**" Once this question is asked, students will usually burst out with an answer, but every once in a while, a student will not have any idea what way he or she learns best.

At this point a tutor can suggest that the student experiment at home with the following: a) making flashcards and **reading** them over and over; b) **writing** the homework exercises in the text over and over again, even if they have already been assigned, just for practice sake; c) making a **recording** of vocabulary or exercises in the student's own voice and then playing and replaying it at various times of the day (or **night:** this actually worked for a German student of mine who was failing, but, after determining that she was primarily an auditory learner, she recorded various dialogues and exercises in her own voice and then programmed the tapes into her alarm clock so that she would wake up with German in the morning! It seemed to work! Her "F" went up to a "C," and she passed the class!).

After all three of these methods have been tried, the student should then be able to see which works the best. It might be that a combination of two or three might work, also, but regardless of the results, students should be much more conscious of how they learn best, and what an empowering feeling it can be for learning a foreign language.

The learning of vocabulary, for example, should be studied in completely different ways depending on the learning style. Students who learn primarily in an **auditory** fashion could use the tape-method to learn their vocabulary, while **visual** learners might use flashcards. **Kinesthetic** learners would learn vocabulary best by writing and re-writing words. The more tutors know about different learning styles and how they impact their students, the better able they will be to give good study skill advice and aid the student in preparing for tests.

Tip # Twelve: Guide Students, Don't Do the Work for Them

The adage to not do students' work for them is as relevant in science or math as it is in foreign language tutoring. It is very important when tutoring to show the student what to do, guide him or her, and then give him or her more and more freedom to develop the skill alone. This tutoring concept is very similar to when one teaches a child to ride a bicycle. One does not ride the bicycle for the child; not only would this be ridiculous, but the child would not learn a thing, would it?

As the director of a tutoring program, I always tell my tutors not to make the student lazy by doing the work for him or her. When a student comes to me with an essay, I will help them become self-correcting by pointing out problem areas and asking the student what he or she believes the problem to be. For instance, if I am correcting a Spanish essay and the student has used the verb *estar* instead of *ser* (i.e., *Yo soy cansado*), I will ask the student if this is logically a permanent or a temporary state (*estar* is used with temporary situations, and *ser*

is used with permanent states), and most usually the student will immediately catch the mistake, and change *Yo soy cansado* to *Yo estoy cansado* (I am tired = a temporary state). Very often students will need only a simple question or phrase to trigger the correct answer.

As tutors, the more experienced we become, the more prepared we will be with an arsenal of questions to help students become self-correcting. The more we ask students questions, the more they will eventually be able to come up with the same questions themselves, eventually making them independent, self-guided learners and independent bicycle riders!

Tip # Thirteen: Be Flexible

This is one of the most important by-laws for tutors after **"Be Patient!"** Foreign Language tutors must be flexible enough to switch from one language to another, from one tense to another, and from one case to another. If I am working with a Spanish One student on the differences between *ser* and *estar,* I need to be able to switch over to Spanish Two mode if a student comes needing help with the imperfect subjunctive, which can be a much more intricate issue. In the same vein, if I am tutoring German, and am explaining the use of the direct object in the accusative case, I need to be able to explain the use of the indirect object in the dative case as well.

Tutoring in more than one language makes it even more imperative that a tutor be an expert in the art of flexibility. Sometimes, for example, it is not uncommon that I will be tutoring two or three (or even four!) languages at the same time. I must be willing and able to switch from German to Spanish to French to Italian or what have you, on demand. It can be difficult and even stressful, but it is very rewarding, and makes my job as tutor infinitely more interesting.

Being flexible also means that the tutor should be able to work with different types of learners. For example, the average student with no learning disabilities may be easier to work with than the Learning Disabled student with an auditory processing disorder. Tutors must be able to use different approaches with students, just like an instructor may use different teaching styles. For example, I would have a student whose learning style is kinesthetic write out exercises extensively, while I may slow down my speech pattern when speaking in the foreign language with a student who is not a strong auditory learner.

Tip # Fourteen: Be Dedicated

As many professionals within the educational realm can attest to, there are some draw-backs to being an educator. Lower salaries commensurate with jobs in industry, high-pressure situations, and endless stacks of paperwork can make a job in education seem like less than a dream job situation. The pros, however, very much out-weigh the cons. Excellent health benefits, the opportunity for life-

long learning, and the opportunity to impact young peoples' lives are very much in education's favor.

The opportunity to make a difference in a student's life is especially important to me as a tutor. Tutors have the opportunity, perhaps even more than teachers, to get to really **know** students. As a teacher I remember often feeling overwhelmed by all of the people in that classroom who needed individualized attention, but simply not being able to give it. As a tutor my role is different. I am able to work with one student at a time.

Sometimes, when our lab gets busy, it is not always easy to spend an hour or even half an hour at a time with one individual, but even with just ten minutes, a tutor is able to spend **quality time** with a student, and the students cherish and appreciate this. This past semester alone I received several compliments on my staff and myself. One student phoned in to let me know how much she appreciated my time, my guidance, and my caring. These qualities are as important in a tutor as are academic knowledge, and to be able to practice them even when things are hectic and crazy takes **dedication.**

It takes dedication to feel sane when there are five students at once vying for your attention. It takes dedication when you need to explain the difference between the *imperfecto* and the *preterito* for the hundredth time. It takes dedication when students come unprepared, expecting the tutor to give them the answers. It takes dedication when budget cut-backs prevent much-needed tutors from being hired. Finally, it takes dedication when students need more help with their personal lives than they do with their subject matter.

Yes, to be a foreign language tutor takes time, energy, kindness, academic excellence, and patience. Dedication to education and the field of foreign language, dedication to the art of being a good tutor and becoming an even better tutor, and especially, dedication to students, is what makes a foreign language tutor truly great. To all the future foreign language tutors out there, I salute your decision to become a tutor, and I wish you all the best.